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ABSTRACT

The nature of literary translation and ways in which it differs from other forms of translation are examined, looking at practical difficulties, challenges, and satisfaction in the profession of literary translation. The difficulties discussed include suggestions about how to get started, legal questions of copyright, and choice of text. Challenges include cultural differences, specialized vocabulary, authors' use of figurative language and language play, translation of dialects within a standard-usage text, interpretation and translation of ambiguities, literary translation as an art form, and the delicate balance between translators' duty to accuracy and their duty to art. The rewards mentioned include opportunity for artistic creativity, sense of co-creation with the author, language "play," and the possibility of material success. (Author)

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LITERARY TRANSLATION: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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abstract

This paper aims to exlore the nature of literary translation and how it differs from other forms of translation. It discusses the practical difficulties involved in the career of literary translation as well as the challenges and satisfactions of such a career.

The difficulties addressed include suggestions as to how to get started, legal questions of copyright and the choice of the text itself. The challenges include such issues as cultural difference, specialised vocabulary, authors' use of plays on words, the translation of dialects within a standard language text, the interpretation and translation of ambiguities, the question of literary translation as an art form and the delicate balance between the translator's duty to accuracy and her/his duty to art.

The rewards mentioned include those of artistic creativity, co-creation with the author, language "play" and the possibility of material success.

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LIterary translation, as the name implies, is the translation of literature or other artistic texts such as film scripts or music lyrics, as opposed to the translation of explanatory prose such as information pamphlets, technical manuals, records, scientific papers, legal documents and the like. This is not meant to be an exhaustive definition, and of course, there will always be borderline cases where it could be difficult to draw a clear line between literary translation and other kinds of translation, but for the purposes of this paper, our definition will suffice. Some people also refer to "oral translation" or "simultaneous translation" such as that which is done at the U.N. to facilitate the spoken communication between delegates or within the health or legal system of Australia to aid migrants of non-Enlish speaking background. Let us rather call the translation of oral communication "interpreting", and limit ourselves to the written word, even if, as in the case of poetry or a film or theatre script, it is meant subsequently to be read out, spoken or recited. Thus, the primary difference between literary translation and other forms of translation is the question of artistic merit. While the form and the register are important even in other types of translation, e.g. the accepted high register and specific form characteristic of scientific discourse may

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be required in an article for a professional journal, literary style and artistic merit are not usually important considerations.

There are basically two ways to approach a career in literary translation. Either you contact (or are contacted by) a publisher who contracts a work out to you for an agreed remuneration, in which case the original author and/or publisher usually retains the copyright; or you select a written work yourself and negotiate with the author and/or publisher to be granted the translation rights. In this case, you own the copyright to the translation and hence royalties are owed you on its sale, but this means that you, like the original author of any written work, must find a publisher interested in publishing it. This second method, however, has several advantages: 1) you retain complete freedom to choose which work you will translate, an important right because one's translation of material for which one has a sympathetic feeling, which somehow speaks to us and resonates within us, is almost always a better translation than one done simply to meet a contractual obligation; 2) if you are an unknown translator, it is very difficult to obtain a contract from a publishing company for any significant artistic work; and 3) if you deal directly with an author whom you admire but who isn't (yet!) on the best-seller list, s/he will often be so flattered at the idea of being translated, that you may be able to obtain the translation rights for free, in which case if your judgment is sound and the book is a success, you have the royalties to a best seller and your future as a literary translator is assured. These, of course, are general guidelines only, however, and when negotiating rights in any individual case, it is best to consult a sollicitor specialising in arts law.

Literary translation is a very challenging activity. The first and very basic issue which arises is that of language competency, because not only a sound but an excellent command of both languages is required, even though normally translation is done from one's second language into one's first. It is absolutely vital to understand the subtlest nuances of both languages, and a large dose of humility is required because no one can know everything. Sometimes even the best of us will have to ask for advice. Arguably the most famous Italian/English translator living, the translator of "The Name of the Rose" and "Foucauld's Pendulum", (just to name two of his best-selling books), William Weaver said when he visited this University in 1990 that he had "pets", that is, a pet priest, for example, whom he could contact to ask about all that monastic and Medieval priestly vocabulary that he needed for "The Name of the Rose". And it isn't only technical or discipline-specific words which cause problems. I recently came across a published translation of a short story by a very famous Italian author--who shall for the moment be anonymous in order to protect the

identity of the erring translator--in which a young child was playing what according to the translator was called the "Russian Mountains" game with her doting father. I pondered this mysterious activity for quite a while before realising that what they were playing was that game where a child perches on his father's bent knees and then slides down and is caught. Italian children refer to that as the "Roller Coaster" game. The translator had fallen into the insidious trap of translating literally two words which he didn't realise had, when joined together, a very specific, if not exactly obvious, meaning.

One of the most difficult as well as common challenges to the translator is cultural anomaly, that is, when an equivalent word does not exist in the language into which s/he is translating for the simple reason that the thing itself does not exist in that country or where the word exists but has a host of cultural connotations different from those of the original. A good example of the first is the French appartment house "concierge", or the Italian "piazza" which, lacking exact equivalents in English-speaking countries, are usually left in the original language in a translated manuscript and as such, serve to give local flavour and colour to it. Eventually many of this sort of words find their way into mainstream English. More difficult are words like "back yard"--and here I am borrowing again from an example which William Weaver gave. In Australia or the United States almost everyone, rich or poor, outside the large cities lives in a house with a back yard. An equivalent word in French, Spanish or Italian does not exist because the average Frenchman, Spaniard or Italian does not live in a house with a back yard. Of course we could translate it as "jardin", "jardín" or "giardino", but that immediately puts us in the realm of the upper classes, and even there, the connotations of a grassy area possibly enclosed by a wooden fence is completely lost. Sometimes translators hoist the white flag, as it were, and add a translator's note, but except in a scholarly text such footnotes are supremely annoying to the reader as they interrupt the flow of the narrative and serve mainly to remind him or her of what is being lost in translation. It is similar to the time-hallowed excuse of the would-be raconteur: "Well, I guess you had to be there." The good literary translator has to strike a delicate balance between comprehensibility and truth to the original text and its local setting.

Similar to this difficulty is that involving the use of dialects. Many languages have surviving dialects or at least dialect traces which are sometimes used either to give authenticity to a very localised setting or to contrast one character with the others as to his/her origin, linguistic background or implied social status. In most cases, the use of dialects or dialect traces cannot be replicated in translation precisely because they are so distinctly and recognisably local. The

effectiveness of using dialect elements in a Mandarin text, for example, to indicate the origin or social status of a particular character will be lost or even rendered ridiculous by any attempt on the part of the translator to substitute it with London cockney or Harlem slang. This would have to be one of, if not the only example of the truth of that offensive Italian saying, "Traduttore traditore." (Roughly translated as "All translators must perforce betray the text.") In almost all cases, at least in this writer's opinion, the use of dialect in the original is untranslatable into a second language and if possible some other device must be found to accomplish the purpose of the author in choosing to make use of a dialect. If too much dialect is used and its use is central to the text, that text may be virtually untranslatable. Similar, but easier to deal with, is the use of words or phrases from a second language, particularly when this is the device the author uses to simply show the "foreignness" of the character or the character's use of "foreign" words in an attempt to display knowledge or sophistication or on the other hand silliness or stupidity. When "Fawlty Towers" was translated into Spanish, Manuel spoke Italian. When, in order to show off his sophistication, the character in an English novel refers to a certain "je ne sais quoi", the French translation might well have "un certain 'something'".

One of the most difficult, but most "fun" challenges involve an author's using plays on words. These, of course, almost never coincide between languages. Two examples, albeit non-literary, spring to mind immediately, the two advertising campaign slogans: "If it's not on, it's not on." and "You find the house and we'll come to the party." These, of course, involve slang or the idiomatic use of language, but many serious authors use this device. Let me give you an example from a short story by Luigi Pirandello. The situation involves a host attempting to persuade his reluctant guest to eat more despite protests that he (the guest) is "parco", that is, abstemious, moderate, temperate, frugal. The host replies, making a play on the word "parco", that that's all right because this is "porco", or "pork", so he should eat it. The obvious problem is that in English "pork" does not rhyme with or have anything else phonically similar to "abstemious" or indeed to any of its other translations. This is the stuff of translators' nightmares. Perhaps you can suggest a better solution. Mine was: "Only half, please... I simply can't manage... I eat sparingly..."
"Sparingly? Well that's spare ribs! Eat!" In cases like these, the translator may take great liberties with the use of words in order to obtain the same effect, even if the subject matter of the play on words is completely different from the original. This is because it is the author's intention of playing with language which is paramount and not the meaning of the specific word used to do it. Some plays on words

are not intended for amusement, but rather to highlight a serious philosophical point or to obtain a certain psychological effect upon the reader due to the connotations of the two or more different meanings of the word. "Coscienza" in Italian means both "conscience" and "consciousness". Pirandello's particular subjectivist philosophy makes great use of this, but in English the translator must decide in each case which meaning is more appropriate because there is no way to have both since such an ambiguity does not exist in English.

Similar to plays on words where it is obvious that the author has intentionally used the device, is the case of what I call "linguistic ambiguity". This occurs when the semantic field of a word in one language only partially coincides with its translation, so that while the denotation of the word may be exactly translated, the connotations cannot. Perhaps an example will make this concept clearer. In a prose poem from Giovanni Finzi-Contini's book Atessa 1943 (in English Tattered Freedom, Leros Press, Canberra: 1994) the author uses the words "due cupi alfieri". The term "alfiere" has several meanings. It is a standard-bearer or ensign. (Think of the "alfieri toscani" with their colourful flag-throwing in medieval costume!) It is also, figuratively, a pioneer or forerunner. This is the literal meaning, the denotation, of the word in the context it is used. The appearance of the two German soldiers referred to as "alfieri" was the first evidence that the war had indeed reached Atessa. But there are two other meanings also inherent in the word in Italian. Historically "alfiere" referred to a rank in the Austrian army as well as to that chess piece known in English as a Bishop! In Italian Finzi-Contini uses the adjective "cupo" or "dark" to give a less positive, more sinister meaning, but of course a "dark forerunner" comes out much too symbolical and disembodied in English. "Standard-bearer" or "ensign" are terms which are much too positive in nature for the context and of course they lack the historical, almost medieval image that "alfiere" suggests. The term which I eventually settled on--to the author's delight-- was "black knight". This keeps a military tone, but a medieval one, as well as the chess connection and it has the sinister connotation of "something evil". The "forerunner" aspect was repeated in other lines in the poem so it could be omitted here, while the Austrian rank was lost entirely. "Traduttore traditore." But for the author, this was quite acceptable.

This brings us to another interesting, if sometimes challenging, aspect of literary translation. In some cases, the translator has the good fortune to be translating a living author who, first of all has at least a reading knowledge of the language the work is being translated into and second, is willing to make him/herself available to the translator for consultation. In these cases, resolving ambiguities can frequently be achieved by a few simple questions to the author, but

even in these few and very fortunate cases, there may be hidden meanings, ambiguities and subtleties of which even the author him/herself is unaware. In such instances the translator must interpret the literature in the same way as any other literary critic and attempt to encapsulate in the translation as much of the hidden greatness as is to be found in the original. In most cases, however, the author is not available for consultation and the translator must have the courage to interpret the meaning and resolve the ambiguities on her own.

Above all, the balance must be maintained between faithfulness to the original text and the aesthetic or artistic merit of the resulting translation. Adapting an old Italian saying about wives to instead describe translations, "The trouble is that the faithful ones aren't beautiful and the beautiful ones aren't faithful." It is the task of the literary translator to produce a text which is both faithful as well as beautiful.

This artistic creativity is perhaps the greatest satisfaction of literary translation as a career, but along with it I must place the sheer fun of playing with language. The co-creation with an author of a new work of art is comparable to the creation and birth of a child; and although most literary translators earn their daily bread in some other way--such as being an interpreter or an academic, a few of us actually attain fame and fortune along with all the fun!